GENDER AND SUSTAINABLE PEACE-BUILDING IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract

One major challenge in contemporary society has been how to achieve sustainable peace for national development. Conflict resolution and peace-building efforts have tended largely to be either gender-neutral or resort to simplistic stereotyping of women, alongside children, as victims, home makers, weak and vulnerable groups, while men are seen as foot soldiers for aggression, violence and conflict. This contrasting characterization of femininity and masculinity along the binary opposites of peace and aggression respectively tends to undermine the realization of the full potentials in the agency of both genders in peace processes and conflict resolution. A truly gendered approach to peace-building, therefore, requires a comprehensive analysis of the variety of roles which men and women play in relation to peace and conflict resolution processes. This paper, therefore, critically reexamines existing gender gaps in peace-building initiatives and processes in contemporary society. The reflective qualitative research

method with content analysis of secondary data was deployed. The paper argues that sustainable peace-building requires a more gender inclusive framework in conflict resolution processes and peace initiatives.

Keywords: Gender, Conflict resolution, Peace-building, National development

Introduction

Contemporary society has been on throes of multidimensional violent conflict and insecurity which undermine sustainable peace and national development. One major criticism against conflict resolution and peace processes has been that they reflect and entrench the dominant patriarchal structure of the society, which is characterized by unequal gender relations, cultural stereotypes and structural subordination along the fault lines of masculinity and femininity. Peace-building and conflict resolution efforts have largely tended to be either gender-neutral or otherwise end up stereotyping women alongside children as vulnerable groups and victims, while men are seen mainly as perpetrators and foot soldiers of aggression and violent conflict whose voices and interests are therefore inevitable in resolving the conflict. This contrasting characterization of femininity and masculinity along the binary opposites of peace and aggression respectively tends to undermine the full realization of the agency of both genders in conflict resolution and limit the prospects of peace-building.

Since the1915 International Congress of Women at the Hague, Netherland, which led to the establishment of International Committee of Women for Permanent Peace (ICWPP) and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) against the backdrop of the First World War, the need for more open and gender-inclusive conflict resolution and peace processes has been emphasized (Sharp, 2012). In the Resolution 1325 (UNSCR), the United Nations Security Council reaffirmed the importance of gender-inclusive peace and conflict resolution processes at all levels. This Resolution underlined the gradual acknowledgement among stakeholders in the international community that women and men have different experiences both in conflict and post-conflict situations, and make unique set of contributions to peace-building and conflict resolution processes (Beever, 2010; Pratt and Richter-Devroe, 2011). However, despite growing general consensus on the need for a more gender sensitive and balanced approach to conflict resolution, there are still obvious gender gaps in policies and implementation of peace initiatives.

In predominantly patriarchal societies, participation of women in peace-building is mainly cast within informal settings due to multidimensional sociocultural and economic constraints and gender role differentiation (Ejim, Oti, & Ogidi, 2018). Moreover, the contributions of women at

these informal social settings are usually not properly acknowledged in peace-building and conflict resolution processes, and therefore not adequately accounted for. Mainstream discourses on conflict resolution use the instrumentalist approach to emphasize "what peace can do for women" while neglecting the important issue of "what women can do for peace". Most peace-building initiatives tend to confine women to their traditional roles as wives, mothers, caregivers and home-makers, thus denying them agency and opportunity to participate in broader agenda-setting for peace-building and conflict resolution.

Formal peace-building and conflict resolution initiatives continue to gloss over issues of gender inclusiveness against the background of dominance of patriarchal practices, ideas and values (Diaz, 2010). Generally, unresolved issues of cultural subordination and structural disempowerment have continued to reinforce unequal power relations and discrimination along various fault lines of gender identity. These structures of marginalization, disempowerment and unequal relations have been attributed as a central reason why people and societies continue to resort to the use of violence, instead of peaceful methods, to handle conflict situations (Puechguirbal, 2010). This paper, therefore, critically reexamines existing gender gaps in peace-building initiatives and processes in contemporary society.

Conceptualizing Gender and Peace-building

Gender refers to what a given society considers an appropriate male and female identities in terms of what is considered acceptable male and female behaviours. **It** refers to socio-cultural roles assigned to the different sexes, apart from biologically determined reproductive roles of the sexes. It describes the characteristics that are ascribed as appropriate for masculine and feminine, and socially delineated acceptable roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women respectively (Jacobs, 1995). Gender encompasses psychological orientation and physiological differentiation of males and females, and includes a range of physical, mental and behavioural characteristics distinguishing masculinity from femininity. In this sense, masculine and feminine are gender categories. It connotes the cultural definition of what it means to be a man or a woman within a given social context. So, while one's sex as male or female is a natural biological category that is the same across all cultures, what that sex means in terms of one's gender role as a "man" or a "woman" in society can be quite different and culture specific (Mikkola, 2011). Gender roles and relations have been shaped by political, religious, philosophical, linguistic, traditional and other cultural forces for many years. Patterns of gender roles and relations have not only impacted on the lives and rights of individuals and groups, but have also had serious implications for the development of the wider society.

Gender is associated to issues surrounding masculinity and femininity, which are social attributes that are acquired and learned through socialization and defined roles, activities and

responsibilities as appropriate to being male and female, apart from natural biological identity. Such socially learned and acquired attributes and roles translate to unequal power relations, resources and privileges between men and women. Sex is the biological and anatomical characteristics that distinguish males and females, consisting of primary and secondary characteristics. Although biological differences between males and females are very important in reality, most differences across sexes are socially constructed gender differences. In gender identities, it is socio-cultural factors, and not biological attributes, that fundamentally determine the parameter for male/female categorisation, what they should do and what pattern of relations should exist between a man and a woman. Gender differences organise social life into culturally sanctioned patterns, and shapes social relations in everyday life as well as in the major social structures in society. This forms the basis for gender role differentiations which are essentially inequitable.

On the other hand, peacebuilding can be understood as a constructive process of promoting positive behaviours, cordial relations, equitable practices, collaborative interactions, mutual respect, inclusive discourses and social justice that will sustain lasting peace (Pogoson & Ogidi, 2017). The notion of peacebuilding suggests that peace, like a building, requires tangible and intangible structures and infrastructures that will provide the necessary foundations for lasting and sustainable peace. Since peace and conflict are manifestations of human behaviours rooted in culture, beliefs and value systems, peacebuilding necessarily requires the cultivation of a culture of peace and peaceful coexistence among individuals and groups (Ogidi, 2024).

Gender and Conflict Dynamics

Gender affects conflict dynamics at the societal and individual levels. Analysis of the role of gender in conflict dynamics can be done at individual, interactional and societal levels. Within these three levels of analysis there are also two radically different gender paradigms that direct the agendas of researchers. First is the essentialist paradigm which assumes that there is a separate female world, one in which women are by nature different from men. In this view women are by nature seen to be so completely different from men that they experience a reality that is different from their male counterpart. This perspective focuses on women's caring, cooperative, and peaceful attribute and their maternal abilities which shape their roles as caretakers and peacemakers in society.

The other paradigm is the post-modern feminism, which refutes the notion that things are essentially different in nature. Thus, it denies the assumptions that women and men have essentially different natures. Post-modern feminism focuses on the exchange between the social construction of individuals and the individual's constitution of themselves. By focusing on language, symbols, alternative discourses, and meaning, post-modern feminism studies how

social power is exercised and how social relations of gender, class and race can be transformed. This does not rule out the specificity of women's experiences, and their differences from men, since under patriarchy women have differential access to platforms for discussion in society.

At the interactional level, gender may surface in conflicts in the ways that parties interpret and give meaning to the conflict. In a study of how gender affects the origins, processes and outcomes of disputes at workplaces, it was found that there are differences in the origins of disputes for men and women (Anderlini, 2007). The social construction of workplaces conditions the way women formulate their grievances and the ways supervisors interpret them. Although both men and women have problems in the workplace which are associated with interpersonal relations, women seem more sensitive than men, and tend more to report personality conflicts than their male counterparts. Women also tend to experience more conflicts over gender role stereotypes, especially where the stereotype has little to do with the requirements of the job. Gender also affects choice of dispute handling mechanisms. The processes used to resolve disputes for women may be less effective than for men. Thus, it can be concluded that gender differences in the origins, processes and outcomes of workplace dispute correlates with patterns of gender inequality in employment.

At the societal level, patriarchy is characterized by historic discrimination and injustice reproduced in institutions, laws, cultures, practices and ideologies. Dominant institutions, laws, cultures, practices and ideologies in society are founded mainly on the life experiences of men, not women. Patriarchy, like other dictatorships, controls and shapes social reality in favour of powerful groups. The notion of male superiority pervades and dominates socialization processes from homes, schools, work places and worship centres. Women and men are stereotypically socialized within rigid gender role differentiations and expectations. Institutions such as the church, the family, and government reproduce these biases in norms, rules, protocols and laws. Women have historically been subjugated politically, economically and culturally. These institutionalized systems of oppression and injustice directly and indirectly create disputes, which permeate all human interactions and engender other forms of conflicts in the wider society.

The institutionalization of patriarchal dominance in society is typified in the state as a political institution, which Max Weber described as "an institution which claims a monopoly of legitimate use of force". This monopoly of use of force and coercion describes the aggressive power of men over women in the home, in the bedroom, at workplace, and everywhere; thus, making patriarchy a comprehensive system of male power which is expressed in every aspect of social life. The problem of conflict is exacerbated by the fact that the state not only claims a monopoly of legitimacy, but also a monopoly of the right to the use of force and aggression even in addressing issues of conflict, thereby further polarizing society. There is need to change the culture that privileges force and aggression as an acceptable way of resolving conflict of interest, and make

room for dialogue, negotiation, mediation, arbitration, conciliation and reconciliation as alternative dispute resolution mechanisms that make for peaceful resolution of conflict through mutually acceptable solutions.

Differences in experiences, psychology and emotions of men and women may lead to understanding of conflict in different ways and, therefore, different approaches to peace and conflict resolution. Women are usually considered more vulnerable especially in relation to men, and this sense of vulnerability of women would be particularly salient in conflict situations characterized by aggression and violence. Women are more likely to feel vulnerable in conflicts with men than in conflicts with fellow women, and are more likely to talk about being afraid of normal conflict and of being the victim of aggression or violence. Concerns about children, identity and status are among factors that contribute to women's vulnerability in times of conflicts. While women can feel more vulnerable, their vulnerability does not seem to interfere with their ability to actively handle disputes. Lack of support from significant others and lack of trust in the other party also reinforce feelings of vulnerability. Women and men also differ in the ways they talk about conflicts. Women talk in-depth and at length about the context of disputes, particularly focusing on relationship among individual or groups parties. Men use more rational, linear and legalistic language to talk about disputes. Women talk about fairness in a way that incorporates both material interests, the network of relationships and social ties in dispute. Conflicts that are more systemic or structural in nature may be individualized and depoliticized by women's approach to peacemaking and peace-building. However, dominant approaches to conflict resolution usually do not allow women needed adaptive leverage to exercise agency.

Essential differences between males and females also affect their conducts in negotiations. Women generally have a relational view of others, a contextual and related definition of self and situation, an understanding of control through empowerment, and problem solving through dialogue. Women's role in negotiation is affected by the patriarchal nature of the early socialization process and the structural systems of discrimination. Gender differences in negotiation behaviour are an artifact of status and power differences between men and women.

Mainstreaming Gender in Peace-building Processes

Some actors in post-conflict operations and initiatives claim preference for gender neutrality in their approach. Many humanitarian organizations cling to the principle of neutrality in post-conflict relief operations, arguing that meeting the immediate practical needs of populations is their primary task and concern, rather than issues of gender. However, in practice, operations like this do not exist in vacuum, but work within communities which have their own gendered power structures in place, where women are often subordinated, oppressed and denied access to important social, political and economic opportunities. An ostensibly "gender neutral"

programme, therefore, can easily reinforce existing gender-based social inequalities, inequities and injustices. This is the central argument of the feminists, who attribute conflict in society to the structure of patriarchy, which is the institutionalization of male dominance over female in all aspects of society, including culture, law, ideology, religion, family, and politics.

There are two key dimensions of an effective gendered approach to peace-building and conflict resolution as recognized by the Peace-building Initiative, a project designed in partnership with the United Nations Peace-building Support Office to share information within the peace-building community. First, such approach must acknowledge that there are differences in women's and men's experiences and ensure that the interests and needs of both are taken care of. Second, it must recognize the key and unique roles that women play in peace-building and conflict resolution processes, and take necessary steps to facilitate those roles as much as possible (Peacebuilding Initiative, 2009).

The UN Women, Peace and Security agenda, which was adopted through the Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in October 2000, is good example of attempt to integrate the gendered approach of conflict resolution. It was passed following the Windhoek Declaration and the Namibia Plan of Action of 1999, which called for the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations to undertake steps to achieve gender mainstreaming in order to improve gender balance and gender equality at all levels of peacekeeping missions (Bertolazzi, 2010). UNSCR 1325 subsequently affirmed this aim and promised the protection of women's rights as well as the guarantee of their equal participation in peace processes. It further affirmed its commitment to increasing women's role in decision-making, expanding the role of women to UN field-based operations, providing training guidelines to all member states on the protection, rights, and particular needs of women, ending impunity with regards to rape and sexual abuse of women and girls, and increasing financial, technical and logistical support for a gender-sensitive approach to peace-building and conflict resolution (UNSCR S/RES/1325, 2000).

However, the concept of gender mainstreaming, which has been adopted by the UN and other international institutions, and by national governments, has been criticized for turning gender issues into a technocratic engagement, where women's involvement and empowerment has been reduced to a simple lucrative industry for various governmental and nongovernmental organizations (Cornwall, Harrison & Whitehead, 2007). Thus, an approach which was explicitly political and feminist in its conception, designed to challenge unequal gender relations in policy design and implementation as well as organizational structure, has been depoliticized as it has been hijacked by the established order, and become bureaucratized, thereby neutralizing its transformative potential.

High levels of sexual harassment and gender discrimination in troop-contributing country has led to the reduction of the number of women in peacekeeping forces. In 2008 only about 2% of military personnel in UN peacekeeping forces were female (Bertolazzi, 2010). This has been demonstrated in food distribution in refugee camps and in conflict zones. Humanitarian agencies have often neglected the need to implement special measures to ensure that women and girls receive (and are able to keep in their possession) equal amounts of food with men, sometimes resulting in women and girls malnutrition due to their lower status in society. Equally, some humanitarian interventions have given extra food to women on account of their assumed role in food distribution, but neglected to provide measures for their security which has sometimes increased their vulnerability to physical attack (Clifton and Gell, 2001). Simple practical considerations such as providing sanitary towels for women living in refugee camps are also often overlooked by humanitarian agencies. The needs for reproductive and sexual health services are also often greater amongst female refugee and displaced populations, yet this too is not given adequate attention (Rehn and Johnson Sirleaf, 2002). It is also important to ensure greater participation of women in peacekeeping operations to reduce problems associated with gender imbalance in such missions. Proponents of a gendered approach to peace-building and conflict resolution argue that increasing women's involvement in peacekeeping missions will have positive effects for women in the countries where such missions are stationed, by providing positive examples of female leadership.

The essentialist definition of women's role as mothers, caregivers and providers has great influence on conflict resolution outcomes. Such notions continue to conflate women and children into one category of weak and vulnerable group that are in need of protection from the hazards of conflict (Puechguirbal, 2010). Arguably, this focus on vulnerability and protection continues to form part of a stereotype against women which aims to justify their exclusion from processes of peace negotiation and dialogue, as they are portrayed as weak and thus, not suitable for the roles involved in peace-building and conflict resolution. Stereotypes of femininity are often highlighted in conflict resolution processes, with women's roles as wives and mothers being overemphasized, whilst their wartime roles, which might have given them greater freedom or a wider diversity of roles, are ignored. As victims, actors and perpetrators in conflict, peace-building and conflict resolution, the exclusion of women from formal processes of peace negotiation and conflict resolution is counterproductive. Their inclusion is imperative to reaching inclusive peace agreements that can lead to lasting and sustainable peace.

There is a general consensus that a crucial component of a gendered approach to peace-building is to acknowledge gender-based vulnerabilities and ensure that women and girls are afforded protection from violence. Conflict and its aftermath often affect women and girls, and men and boys, in different ways (Sweetman, 2005). Men and women assume different roles and are

targeted differently by virtue of their various genders. Women have specific vulnerabilities and often experience multiple forms of violence during and after conflicts. Targeting bodies of women for sexual purposes is usually a systematic strategy used during conflict. Specific forms of violence, especially sexual violence, are used against women in what has come to be defined as *gender-based violence*, violence that targets individuals or groups of individuals because of their gender. Rape of enemy women in conflict is usually seen as being aimed at men, using a woman's body as a vessel, violating both a man's honour and his exclusive right to sexual possession of his woman as his property. Thus, the rape of women as a strategy designed to humiliate men and the community reflects the fundamental objectification of women. Women are the target of the abuse at the same time as their subjectivity is completely denied (Copelon, 2002).

While sexual violence is rife, women's ability to take part in peace-building, conflict resolution and development activities is severely undermined. There are numerous socio-economic and health consequences of being a survivor of sexual violence; examples include living with HIV, sexual infections and mutilations, and psychological trauma. Above all, the shame and stigma attached to women who admit to having been raped is devastating; therefore, it is also crucial to challenge the social and cultural norms and their dictates about women's honour and virtue as attached to sexual purity. Furthermore, extremely high levels of violence against women after the formal cessation of conflict, problematizes the notion of 'peacetime' for women. It can be argued that women are not more vulnerable per se in times of war, but are rather made more vulnerable by the pre-existing inequalities in so-called peace times. Women suffer in wartime, not because of any intrinsic weakness, but because of the disadvantaged position which they have been made to occupy in society (Puechguirbal, 2010).

Ignoring underlying gender power relations and inequalities in a society can lead to an oversight of some of the fundamental causes of conflict and how they can be properly handled and resolved. For example, portraying women purely as victims of conflict can obscure women's agency and undermine the positive work which some women do in resisting conflict and violence, and can weaken future potential of women (Strickland and Duvvury, 2003). It is important to note that women are also involved in generating conflict and supporting violence, as well as directly participating in combat. Furthermore, using the category 'women', without further differentiating among them, hides a wide range of differences in their experiences. For instance, women from privileged and wealthy sectors of society will experience conflict and its aftermath in a very different way from the majority, who are too poor to emigrate when they are threatened with violence. There is need, therefore, to predicate conflict resolution activities on a balanced perspective of the diverse roles which men and women play and the various positions they occupy in society and how these impact on peace and conflict processes. Without challenging gender norms, and the attendant power imbalances between women and men, discriminatory attitudes

and practices which disadvantage women and compromise their human rights will prevail in the post-conflict era. Without addressing the fundamental power dynamics and imbalances which are at the root of conflict, a sustainable and 'positive' peace for both men and women cannot be established (Gibson, 2011).

Conclusion

Conflict resolution and peace-building efforts have been largely patriarchal, tending to focus mainly on simplistic stereotypes of women as victims and suffering mothers, and have conflated women and children into one category of innocent, weak and vulnerable group. Stereotypes of women as inherently peaceful or men as violent can also be damaging and reductive. Ignoring women's participation and complicity in organized violence could lead to false assumptions about the actual and potential roles of women in conflict and peace-building process.

In the same way women are not to be assumed to be perpetual victims of conflict and natural peace-builders alone, it is also important that men are not stereotyped as being naturally aggressive, violent and perpetrators of conflict. Men, like women, are usually socialized into a preexisting structure of gender characteristics and gender role differentiation and expectations. Traits commonly identified in cultural definitions of masculinity often include egotism, aggression, dominance, and competition (Pankhurst, 2000). Clearly, these traits are easily linked with violent behaviour. A gender analysis suggests that social norms about masculinity strongly influence the prevalence of, and tendency towards, the violent expression of conflict in many places. Sustainable peace-building, therefore, demands that these norms that reinforce gender-based aggressive behaviours and violent conflicts be constructively addressed using the various agents of socialization and necessary policy actions.

Suggestions

There is need, therefore, for a more gendered approach to peace-building and conflict resolution that will be able to objectively account for the positive roles which both genders play in peace and conflict resolution processes in society. Moreover, it is important to consider how societal socialization on what it means to be masculine and feminine marginalize women and mount pressure on men to conform to the traditional masculine characteristics of vigour, strength and power and their associated role of fighter and violence. A truly gendered approach to peace-building and conflict resolution must have a comprehensive analysis of the variety of roles which men and women play in peace and conflict processes. Deliberate efforts and policy initiatives should be made to dismantle structures of intersectional gender-based inequality, inequity and subordination cutting across various institutions of society, including the family, culture, law, politics, religion and the workplace.

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